



NEWS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 26, 1998

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INTERIOR SECRETARY SIGNS LANDMARK CONSERVATION AGREEMENT TO REMOVE EDWARDS DAM

AT EDWARDS, BABBITT PUTS DAM OWNERS ON NOTICE

Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt today signed papers with state and private officials and a coalition of conservation organizations clearing the way for the removal of the 917-foot Edwards Dam, spanning the Kennebec River in the city of Augusta, Maine.

When it comes out within a year, the dam - which has blocked 17 miles of prime fish-spawning habitat for 160 years - will be the first hydrodam removed in the United States. It also marks the first time that the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (which licenses about 2,000 other dams) refused to relicense a dam.

"Today, with the power of our pens, we are dismantling several myths: that hydrodams provide clean pollution-free energy; that hydropower is the main source of our electricity; that dams should last as long as the pyramids; and that making them friendlier for fisheries is expensive and time consuming," Secretary Babbitt said.

"There are 75,000 large dams in this country, most built a long, long time ago," he said. "Many are useful but some are obsolete, expensive and unsafe. They were built with no consideration of the environmental costs. We must now examine those costs and act accordingly."

"This is not a call to remove all, most, or even many dams," he continued. "But this is a challenge to dam owners and operators to defend themselves - to demonstrate by hard facts, not by sentiment or myth, that the continued operation of a dam is in the public interest, economically and environmentally. Often the outcome will mean more environmentally friendly operating regimes, perhaps achieved through the installation of fish passages or other technological fixes. In some cases, like the one we are here to highlight today, it will mean actual removal."

(more)

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has consistently advocated for removal of Edwards Dam. For more than 160 years, the dam has prevented free passage of Atlantic salmon, American shad, river herring, striped bass, shortnose sturgeon (listed as endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act), Atlantic sturgeon, rainbow smelt and American eel.

"As many as 4 million river herring, 500,000 shad, and 3,000 salmon may someday soon find suitable habitat on the Kennebec River above Augusta," Babbitt predicted. "The environmental benefits of dismantling this dam far outweigh any future usefulness. Its removal is a conservation milestone and was achieved through a remarkable partnership that can become a model for the nation."

Under the Lower Kennebec River Comprehensive Hydropower Settlement Accord, Edwards Manufacturing and the City of Augusta will relinquish their hydropower license and ownership of Edwards Dam to the State of Maine by Jan. 1, 1999. The State in turn will dismantle the dam in 1999 and return the property to the city.

The accord also embodies a unique partnership among the City of Augusta, State of Maine, Department of the Interior and other federal agencies, private conservation organizations, upstream dam owners, and Bath Iron Works. This diverse group will work together to ensure funding for dam removal and associated restoration work. Trust funds established under the agreement will be used to help restore and manage Atlantic salmon, American shad, river herring, striped bass, and other migratory fish in the Kennebec River during the next 15 years.

Edwards Dam was built in 1837 to provide hydro mechanical power to Augusta's textile industry. It has had the capability of producing hydroelectric power since 1913 and currently generates 3.5 megawatts, a minute percentage of Maine's energy supply.

The dam is the first along the Kennebec River, located approximately 40 miles from river's mouth on the Atlantic. It measures 917 feet long and 25 feet high and creates a reservoir covering more than one thousand acres. The next dam on the river is located 17 miles upstream from Augusta.

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